

Why I Am Not An Agnostic

IMPORTANT: This lesson is the eighth part of an ongoing “chapter” on why I am not an agnostic. The earlier lessons are available in written, video, or podcast form at www.Biblical-Literacy.com. Those earlier lessons contain important information on different kinds of evidence, different kinds of arguments, as well as the paradigm used for analyzing the issues. That information is not repeated here, so those who are new to this series may want to go back and consider those lessons when evaluating my thoughts.

INTRODUCTION

In some circles, there is a general consensus that people who “read the Bible literally,” and who believe in the Judeo-Christian God, must be at odds with scientific proof and evidence. It is posited by many that science explains the world today as a result of evolution while the Judeo-Christian teaching from the Bible is one of “creation in seven days.” Some go further and point out Biblical genealogies and believe that the earth is only some 6,000 years old. It is as if we have a choice, believe the Bible or believe in science.

If the choice is between the faith and science, then I am not surprised at anyone who chooses science. The Bible does not put science and faith at odds with each other, however, and neither do I. I believe the Bible actually teaches that we can find reliability in the cosmos, and that the fundamentals of science – an ordered universe, cause and effect, etc. – go hand-in-hand with God as revealed through Scripture.

Before I can consider placing the God versus science debate in the scales of evidence, and before I can determine how much weight to assign it, I need to understand if it is a proper debate.

Most every work day finds me involved in a lawsuit. Lawsuits have “styles,” which is a technical name used for the label or filing information of the case. The party suing is generally termed the “plaintiff” and the party sued is the “defendant.” In the style, the plaintiff is listed followed by a “v.” or “vs.” and then the defendant. So the style might read, “Smith v. Jones” or “Smith vs. Jones.” The “v.” and “vs.” are abbreviations for “versus.” If the case is “Smith v. Jones,” then Smith is suing Jones and the two are opposed to each other. If, however, Smith and Jones are on the same side, and they are both suing “Williams,” then they get on the same side of the “v.” and it is styled, “Smith and Jones v. Williams.”

As I read the Bible, the debate framed by many as “science” on one side of the “v” and God and the Bible on the second side of the “v.” is wrongly framed. In legal terminology we would say, “Objection, your honor, this begs the question.” Before this debate can be

framed as science versus the Bible and God, we must first determine whether they might be on the same side of the “v.”!

This consideration means we need to carefully consider the claims of the Bible as they relate to science, and determine whether or not the two are at odds. If they are, so be it. If they aren't, this point becomes moot. So I now consider the fourth common argument against the existence of God:

4. Does a belief in God mesh with science in making sense of the cosmos?

The Importance of Context

Most anyone can read the Bible and understand the core messages and history. If people want to get into greater depth and probe it more carefully, there is a real need for placing it into context. To read it as a 21st century novel, textbook, or dissertation is a mistake. The Bible itself is a composite of many different writings put together over thousands of years. Those writings are in different languages, each of which has ceased in common usage. The writings were set into their historical, geographical, and cultural contexts. Combining all of this means that careful, deliberate, and academic work is involved in plumbing the fuller depths of teachings and claims made in the Bible.

Any consideration of what the Bible says about science is going to have to be done very carefully. It's not that science is a post-renaissance endeavor, for Aristotle wrote on science, but the Bible is not itself a writing on science. The Bible claims to be an historical accounting of God revealing himself through interactions with historical peoples.

This means that we need to read the Bible in its context to understand its claims. We need to understand the language forms and expressions, including poetry forms, we need to put it into its cultural context, and we need to put it into its historical context.

Here is an example. If I was transported back in a time machine to 1500 BC, and I was placed in the town of Jericho in the Rift Valley near the Jordan River, and I was told to write explanations to some goat herders who also maintained grape vines about how genetic modifications to their vineyard could increase resistance to mold, I would be a bit hard pressed to do it. I could discuss genetic encoding and DNA splicing, but I strongly suspect their vocabulary wouldn't have words for deoxyribonucleic acid (“DNA”), especially since DNA was not isolated until 1869 and wasn't correctly modelled until Drs. Watson and Crick in 1953.

So with the importance of context, linguistically, ideologically, culturally, and more, we examine the Bible to see if its claims about God are at odds with science, or perhaps on the same side! We use two major Biblical passages for examination. First, we consider the

Bible's claims about creation, weighing them against scientific claims of the origin of life. Second, we fast forward 1,500 years from the writings in Genesis on creation to those of the Jewish rabbi Paul in the Christian writings of the New Testament for his affirmative claims about God and the cosmos.

Creation and Evolution

Here we return to the vineyard/DNA example, but on steroids! The Biblical story of creation seems to date back well over a thousand years before the birth of Jesus. We are considering a story that spoke into an ancient civilization in a long dead language. Still, through the hard work of amazing linguists and archaeologists, we are not without the tools to understand the context of the day as well as the language of the story.

The creation story belongs to ancient Israel, who claimed it to be a divine revelation speaking into their culture giving meaning and significance to who they were, to the cosmos, and to daily life. The Israelites were not the only culture to have creation stories, but their neighbors had *nothing at all* like that if Israel. The stark theological differences between Israel and her neighbors¹ begin in the Genesis texts. Israel has a different view of God, nature, and man. Old Testament scholar Bill Arnold writes,

The worldview expressed in Genesis 1-4 is not just *different* from its counterpart in the literature of the ancient world; it is *opposed* to it.²

These differences are first and foremost found in the teachings of the Genesis creation texts. Core differences include the view of God, nature, and humanity.

1. God

A. One God versus many.

¹ As we speak of Israel's neighbors, we cover a number of different cultures and civilizations. North and east of Israel were Mesopotamia and the cultures of the Sumerians, the Akkadians, the Amorites, the Assyrians, and the Babylonians. The Hittites were principally north as well. These people existed at the dawn of civilization when writing was first taking form. While we know of these people, their origins and roots are somewhat a matter of conjecture. To the south of Israel, the Egyptians were the principal people. Along the western edge of Israel were the coastal neighbors. This region was a melting pot of people bridging the larger national developments of Mesopotamia in the north and Egypt in the south. These people, collectively referred to as people of "Syria-Palestine," included the Philistines, the Arameans, Canaanites, and some Amorite people. A number of the city-states in this area have produced ancient texts for study, notably those at Ugarit and Ebla. Scholars speak of these cultures in this time as the "Ancient Near East" or "ANE" for short.

² Arnold, Bill T., *Encountering the Book of Genesis*, (Baker Academic 1998) at 49.

The first and obvious difference in Israel's claimed revelation is the number of gods. Rather than believing in many deities (some systems had hundreds of gods), there was only one. One God creates everything: heavens, earth, sky seas, land, vegetation, sun, moon, stars, animals, and man. There are not gods for each item or area. There is no competition between gods. There is no need. The one God as revealed is over all of nature. He controls everything.

The famous 19th century Jewish Rabbi Samson Hirsch wrote in his commentary on Genesis that the full creation of everything by God signifies a God who:

rules completely freely over the material and form of all creatures, over the forces that work in matter, over the laws that govern the working, and over the resulting forms.³

B. God is above creation, not a part of creation.

Hirsch contrasts the polytheistic neighbors of Israel who believed that there were pre-existing forces in nature to which even the gods were subject. Toward that end, many gods must have existed to deal with the many aspects of nature. No one God was over nature.⁴

An extension of Hirsch's point made earlier is the transcendence of God. As a God who existed before any creation, and as the God who does the actual creating, this God is apart from the things created. In this sense, God becomes the "Super Nature," the one beyond and outside of the natural order.

As we read in Genesis of God creating all things, we must note how different this was from Israel's neighbors. For many of the neighbors, the gods themselves *were* the sky, the moon, the sun, *etc.* (or at least they were inextricably linked to those elements of nature).

If you were to go to Egypt and look at the ceiling of a monument built by or for Pharaoh Seti I (ruled from ca. 1291-1279 BCE) called the Osirion, then you would see the engraved story of a goddess called "Nut." Nut was the goddess that was stretched out above the atmosphere as the sky. Another god named Shu (who *was* the atmosphere) held up Nut. Shu in turn was standing on Geb, the god who was the earth. Other gods, including the sun, moon, and stars, would come forth from various parts of Nut and then return at their

³ Hirsch, S.R., *Commentary on the Torah* (Judaica Press 1966), transl'd by Isaac Levy, Vol.1 at 2.

⁴ Genesis 1 uses a word for God found throughout the Old Testament—*elohim*. This word is plural in form, even though it is used as a singular noun when used of God. Hirsch explained that the plural form is used because in the "One Unique God" are found the "whole plentitude of power of these supposedly numerous *elohims*." *Ibid.* at 4.

appropriate times.⁵ Shu was not only holding up Nut, but with the help of another four to eight gods, Shu also held back the waters in the heavens.

Not so with God as revealed to Israel. He was not found in the sun, nor was he in a nearby storm. God was beyond creation and controlled creation. Here I add the next difference.

C. God is outside space/time, not captive to space/time.

When we speak of space and time, we are using modern scientific ideas and words. However, the gist of those concepts are valid ways to verbalize a difference in understanding that came from Israel's revelation apart from the imaginings of their neighbors.

A singular God who reigns over all nature, whether in space or time, is a God who is not subject to the laws of nature. This is a miracle-working God who can bend, suspend, or alter things at the mere word of his mouth. An over-age couple can have a baby, dreams can have meaning, famine can be foreseen, bushes can burn without getting burned up, seas can be parted and people can be delivered—all of which we will read as the books of Moses continue.

In contrast, in the *Enuma Elish*, we read of the main god (Apsu) being put to sleep by a magical spell cast by his offspring, a god named Ea. While asleep, Apsu is tied up and killed.⁶ This can happen when gods are not over the laws of nature (or its magical spells, as those laws were deemed to include in that era). Israel's revelation showed that God was not so vulnerable. God was above creation, neither a part of it (point 2 above) nor subject to it.

Another aspect of God's existence beyond space and time is the genesis of God himself. Over and over in the writings of Israel's neighbors, we read ideas and proclamations of how the gods were made. In the *Enuma Elish*, Apsu and Tiamet "were mingling their waters together" when "the gods were formed between them." In commenting upon it, the translator Benjamin Foster adds:

⁵ An easy-to-read translation of "*The Book of Nut*" by James P. Allen, is found in Hallo, William, ed., *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World* (Brill 1996) Vol. 1 at 5. Other Egyptian records teach that Shu (the atmosphere) was sneezed out by Atum Scarab! See the pyramid text spells (1.4) in Hallo at 7. Coffin texts teach the origins of Nut, Shu and Geb. (Hallo at 10ff).

⁶ Hallo, William, ed., "Epic of Creation (Enuma Elish)" *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World* (Brill 1996), Vol. 1 at 391, transl'd by Benjamin R. Foster.

This elaborate theogony [creation of gods], or genealogy of the gods, builds on Sumerian precedent. It finds a parallel in Hesiod's version of Greek mythology, and is perhaps its ultimate source, but is absent in the Bible.⁷

God revealed himself to Israel as beyond the material world and its time. God made time ("morning and evening, day one, *etc.*); he was not subject to time. Scripture would later reveal that God's eternal nature included no beginning and no end.

D. God is not a sexual being.

As Israel's neighbors went about constructing images of the gods, they conceived of the gods as they did all other beings—male and female. Not like the unique view Israel got from revelation.

A reading of the Hittite legends includes sordid tales of physical and sexual conquest among the gods that impact their interactions with creation. In *Elkunirsa and Asertu*, we read of the god El (creator of earth) and his goddess wife Asertu. Without El's knowledge, Asertu attempts to seduce the god Ba'al, who refuses her advances. Asertu then complains to her husband and we read about the gods plotting and scheming behind each one's back in a divine saga that reads like a lurid soap opera.⁸

This is typical of man's construction of gods in man's image rather than a revelation of God beyond human thought. Genesis is careful to teach that God made man in his image, both male and female (Gen. 1:27). As such, God is neither male nor female, but both sexes find themselves expressing some aspects of God.

E. God does not have man's limitations.

Israel's God is not man in a super-sized form. God does not have limitations of strength, drive, or emotions. This sets apart the gods as imagined by Israel's neighbors.

Contrast the gods in the *Enuma Elish*. A point was reached where the younger gods were bothersome to the older gods because of their "offensive behavior" and their "noisome actions." The older god Apsu yelled at his wife (mother of the younger gods):

Their behavior is noisome to me! By day I have no rest, at night I do not sleep! I wish to put an end to their behavior, to do away with it! Let silence reign that we may sleep!⁹

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ "Elkunirsa and Asertu", Hallo at 149, transl'd by Gary Beckman.

⁹ Hallo, at 391.

With that, the gods started plotting to kill each other. After the killing starts, war is brought on for some time until a peaceful accord is reached.

As we continue to read the story, we see more human limitations on the gods. One principal victor in the *Enuma Elish* was the god Marduk. Marduk was also the god who made the decision to create man. His reason? The gods were tired from their hard work! Man was made to:

bear the gods' burden that those [the gods] may rest.¹⁰

Similarly, in the Atrahasis, man was made because the gods:

did forced labor...digging watercourses...They heaped up all the mountains...Forced labor they bore night and day. [They were com]plaining, denouncing, [mut]tering down in the ditch... [the gods then say], "Let the midwife create a human being, Let man assume the drudgery of god."¹¹

The gods of men were also subject to human pouting! In a Hittite story, one god named Telipinu gets angry, leaves his job post and goes to sleep in a meadow. To understand the significance of this to the people, we must realize that,

In the Hittite view, the operation of the universe required that each deity and human conscientiously perform his or her proper function within the whole. Calamity manifested in some sector of the cosmos was an indication that the god or goddess responsible for it had become angry and had abandoned his or her post.¹²

Once Telipinu leaves, the world falls apart! Breeding of livestock stopped, the weather went haywire, crops would not grow as famine hit the land, and even the gods themselves could not eat a satisfying meal! The storm-god (Telipinu's father) does not know where his son is and refuses to go look for him in spite of his wife's (the "mother-goddess") vehement demands. So, the mother-goddess sends a bee to find her son, the god Telipinu.

The bee finds the god, stings him a few times to wake him up, which only increases his anger. At that point, everyone (human and divine) went to work to get Telipinu in a better mood and restore order to the world!

¹⁰ *Ibid.* at 400.

¹¹ "Atra-Hasis", Hallo at 450-451, transl'd by Benjamin Foster.

¹² "The wrath of Telipinu", Hallo at 151, transl'd by Gary Beckman.

Into these cultures and these mindsets comes Israel's unique revelation of God as Creator given in Genesis. God is not a larger version of a human. He has none of the human foibles. In fact, humanity itself has none of those foibles until sin enters the picture.

Creation was not hard work for God. He spoke and it came to be, over and over again. At the end of six days of creation, there was a day of rest, but the text gives no indication that God was resting on the seventh day out of fatigue. Instead, we need to see that the "rest" of the Sabbath was at its core the simple "stopping" of the creative activity.

Sabbath is our anglicized version of the Hebrew word formed from the root *sbt*. The verb in its root means, "to cease."¹³ On the seventh day, God quit working, but not out of fatigue. God had made a world that was very good. He quit because his work was finished. We might equate it to a rest in a musical score. The musicians are not stopping because they are tired. It is a time when the music is not to be played.

On a similar note of tiresome work, the gods in neighboring cultures had a lot of work in making humans. They had to kill gods for the necessary blood (*Atrahasis* at 208ff; *Enuma Elish* at Tab VI.30ff) to mix with clay. Needless to say, the process of figuring out which god to kill and then killing that god was no simple matter! In Genesis, we see the contrast of God simply speaking and things coming to be. Man was fashioned out of the dust of the field, but no gods died for animation. God simply breathed life into man.

2. Nature

As we consider what Genesis says about nature, we need to make a distinction between "cosmology" and "function." By cosmology, we are referring to the way the ancients understood the universe. We might call it their language of the cosmos. In other words, we think of space as a vacuum where solar systems occupy space, where stars are distant suns and where the planets rotate around those suns. We think of earth as round, surrounded by an atmosphere. Clouds are a gathering of condensation and moisture. Mountains are areas where earth has projected up from the planet. The seas are the waters that have accumulated in low-lying areas. The tides are gravitational response to the moon. This is our language of the earth, and we can write, speak, and communicate with these terms and ideas.

Israel and its neighbors did not speak this same language of cosmology. The Ancient Near-Eastern scholar John Walton goes through a thorough analysis of the cosmological language of the Ancient Near East. He demonstrates that the Israelites spoke the same language as their neighbors. Hence, God's revelation uses terms that would have made

¹³ Jenni, Ernst and Westermann, Claus, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Hendrickson 1997) Vol. 3 at 1297.

sense to the Israelites, even though they are at odds with our terms of understanding today. This is the importance of context in language as well as culture and ideas.

Walton makes the point:

If we aspire to understand the culture and literature of the ancient world, whether Canaanite, Babylonian, Egyptian, or Israelite, it is essential that we understand their cosmic geography. Despite variations from one ancient Near Eastern culture to another, there are certain elements that characterize all of them.¹⁴

Toward that end, we can see that the ancients thought of the cosmos as layers, much like a three-layer cake. The earth was the middle layer. The heavens were the top layer and the netherworld was the bottom (literally the “underworld”). The people did not think of multiple continents but thought of one stretch of land that was shaped like a disk. At the edges of this disk were mountains that held up the sky. We might consider the sky as the frosting between the top two layers with the heavens (layer three) being above the sky.

The sun moved across the sky during the day and returned through the underworld at night to begin its journey again the next morning. Stars were on tracks that set their course and they would come out at night and move on course. The earth itself floated on waters, which were kept from overcoming the earth by the force of the sky. There were also waters above the sky which, when the windows of heaven were opened, fell through the sky to the ground.

A number of conservative scholars, including Walton, see this language used in Genesis as the creation teaches its unique lessons of function, discussed below. So, for example, in Genesis 1:6-8 we read:

And God said, “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so. And God called the expanse Heaven.

These scholars see this language as speaking God’s function into the cosmos language of the Israelites. Similarly, we see this in the following verses that gather the lower waters together into one place so that dry land appeared (Gen. 1:9-10). God also filled the expanse of heaven with the sun, moon and stars (Gen. 1:14-18). We will see it also when Genesis

¹⁴ Walton, John H., *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Baker Academic 2006) at 166. Luis Stadlemann did groundbreaking work on similar analysis in *The Hebrew Conception of the World* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press 1970). I have charted through much of the analysis of Walton in this text.

7:11 and 8:2 speak of the windows of heaven opening, bringing rain, and closing, stopping the rain.

Where the Genesis creation account stands out from the secular versions is in the makeup and the function of this cosmic geography. The make-up we discussed above. For most of Israel's neighbors, these celestial features were actually associated with individual gods. To Israel was revealed the truth that creation was simply that—creation. God was not the elements, God made the elements. This is true regardless of the “geographical language” one speaks!

Even beyond that, there is uniqueness to the function of the created cosmic elements. For Israel's neighbors, the cosmos contained elements tamed by the gods and then used for the gods' purposes. Man, as was explained earlier, was made to work the cosmos to the benefit of the gods. Genesis sets the story the other way around.

In Genesis, God makes the cosmos for man. God sets the forms of heaven, earth, sky, and seas filling them with fish, birds, and animals. Each is set to produce more after its own kind. These are made with the view that man would have stewardship and dominion over them and they would serve man, not God (Gen. 1:26). God makes plants as food for beasts, but ultimately for man (Gen. 1:29). God sets the sun and stars, but does so not for his purposes, but to set out seasons for man (Gen. 1:14).

South African scholar Izak Cornelius discussed and compared ANE visual representations of the world with the concepts in the Old Testament in a 1994 issue of the *Journal for Northwest Semitic Languages* concluding:

The Hebrew Bible reflects the cosmology of ancient times, but most modern visual representations of the so-called 'biblical world' err in representing natural phenomena as they are understood in modern terms. These should be reconstructed from the Ancient Near Eastern sources themselves.

Cornelius concluded that:

The Ancient Near Eastern mentality perceived phenomena such as the sea, heaven and sun not as natural entities, but as numinous powers. The idea of the tripartite world (heaven, earth and underworld or subterrestrial water) persists in all Ancient Near Eastern cultures. The Hebrew Bible contains some of these ideas, e.g. the winged sun, the pillars of the earth and the chaotic ocean, but gave an *interpretatio Israelitica* (an interpretation unique

to Israel) to them. YHWH is the one who created with wisdom and controls the powers of nature.¹⁵

Cornelius points out that in the Scriptures, heaven and the primeval waters are not divine powers, but simply God's creation. In Scripture, God upholds the pillars of the earth; God exercises dominion over the stars, the sun, and even the underworld; and it was God who established the world through wisdom. ("The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens" Prov. 3:19).

3. Humanity

Like the conception of God, the revelation of man/woman and their purpose and role is as different from that of Israel's neighbors as night is from day. Only Genesis speaks clearly of two people as the progenitors of the entire human race; the neighbors have the gods making people in groups.¹⁶ Also unlike Genesis, a number of ANE accounts have the creating deities providing necessary physical elements in making humans (tears, flesh, blood, *etc.*) often mixed with clay. This shows the connection between humans and deities by shared physical material. In Genesis, however, the connection is by the breath (Spirit) that God provides to people as God makes people in his image. This sets people in a connection that is a familiar relationship with the Creator (walking and talking in the Garden of Eden), not simply some lesser extension.

Genesis does say that people were made in God's "image" (Gen. 1:26-27). Walton notes that in the ANE, it was usually the king who represented the image of God, not everyone else! Image was not physical likeness, but rather a responsibility and identity of role and function.¹⁷ In other words, people had the responsibilities God assigned as well as the abilities necessary to accomplish the tasks. Scholars have recognized various inherent ways God made people in his image in this sense.

Humanity has the ability to create, to think, to choose, to plan, to accomplish, to appreciate, to discern, to process, and to communicate. These abilities are those that God possesses and dispenses to everyone. In the revelation of Scripture, humans are embodied with the necessary qualities of God to do his work as his representatives and on his behalf. The rest of Scripture will teach that humanity fell from this created state, but with the presence of the Holy Spirit and through prayer, mankind still works to fulfill the will of God on earth.

¹⁵ Cornelius, Izak, "The Visual Representation of the World in the Ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible," *JNSL* 20/2 (1994).

¹⁶ See the analysis and cites in Walton at 205.

¹⁷ Walton at 212.

One net result of this teaching on people is the recognition that people were made for a purpose. Like creation in general, no one is an accident. No new human life, yours, mine, your spouse, your friend, or for that matter your enemy, is an accident. Creation is God's choice. We exist because God chose to put each of us here.

The implications for human value are paramount, as referenced earlier in the discussion of the inherent value we all sense in other people. A person's value lies in the imprint of God's image. One's value is not in looks, brains, social position, physical dexterity nor athletic talent. One's value is in her and his nature as an image bearer of Almighty Creator God.

While this unique teaching of the Bible stands out, we fairly ask the next question: But how does this interplay with evolution?

That we will pick up next week.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *"In the beginning, God created..."* (Gen. 1:1).

God is not a man, nor is he man's invention. God exists outside of man, outside of space and time, and outside of creation. Man may deny it or man may not understand it, but it does not take away from its truth. All that is, is from the hand of God, and he maintains his power and control over it. There is nothing in your life or mine that is outside God's control or power. Nothing.

2. *"...the heavens and the earth..."* (Gen. 1:2).

The world should never be viewed as God or confused with God. He made it for his purposes. It proclaims his glory even as he made it for man's use. That does not mean man has a right to use earth destructively in a reckless fashion. Man has responsibilities to tend to earth with godly stewardship. But, God's goal was not simply to make a beautiful sunset. He made the beautiful sunset for man to appreciate and give glory to God as Creator. All things exist ultimately for God's glory, even as they exist for man's usage.

3. *"So God created man in his own image."* (Gen. 1:27).

God chose to make you. He made you for a reason. God's purpose for you rotates around his relationship with you. God has put within you the traits and characteristics that enable you to choose to accept his tasks and walk in his service. You might refuse to claim and act on his image, but it is there nonetheless. Take time to ask how God wants to use you each day. What can you do in relationship with him to accomplish his purposes through you?